

BEDOUIN  
*of*  
THE SINAI



PAOLA CROCIANI



*E*xploring various aspects of Bedouin life, Paola Crociani's photographs capture intimate moments set in the splendour of the Sinai landscape. The most remote region of Egypt, away from the bustle of Cairo and the tourist buses of the pyramids, Sinai is one of the few preserves of the old-fashioned nomadic Bedouin way of life. Paola Crociani's focus on the incongruities of traditional attitudes with the gradual intrusion of modern commercialism gives a rich, yet unsentimental, portrait of a people and way of life which is increasingly under threat. An introduction by John King explains the background of the Bedouin culture, and how it is changing in the modern world.

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B E D O U I N  
*of*  
T H E S I N A I







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P A O L A C R O C I A N I

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## LOCATION

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## P R E F A C E

**D**o pore over maps and atlases was my preferred form of reading as a child. It was therefore natural that nomadism, with its refusal of a sedentary and 'civilised' life, as accepted by the majority, should have held a fascination for me. And of all nomads, it is the Arab Bedouin who have captured the imagination of some of the most interesting travellers such as Doughty and Burton, and more recently Wilfred Thesiger.

My first contacts with the Bedouin were made in the late 1970s when, living in Beirut, I travelled to the deserts of Jordan. Then, in 1983, while working out of Cairo as a photographer with Associated Press, I was given the opportunity of being sent to the Sinai Peninsula to cover the Israeli handover of Sinai to Egypt. I found both the territory and its people fascinating and was determined to return. Very shortly after this I worked as photographer for a project sponsored by the Dutch government for a booklet entitled *Customary Laws of North Sinai*. These photographs are now on permanent exhibition at the North Sinai Ethnographic Museum in el-Arish, the regional capital.

Through this project I had, for the first time,

the experience of being in close contact with Bedouin Arabs, the men and their families whose way of life revolved around the ownership of camels and goats and the constant need to find pasture for them. This nomadic existence demanded a discipline and rigid code of values and morals to which every individual was required to adhere, a code harsher and more strict than that followed by those Arabs (*al-hadar*) who had opted for a settled life in the towns. It was a life that contained an element of risk and romance that had a special appeal for someone who had the suspicion that modern man, in his search for security, had lost more than he had gained.

Having had my first taste of Sinai, I later decided, having left Associated Press to work as a freelancer in Cairo, to pay further visits to the area and to extend my knowledge beyond the northern areas, in particular to the south and centre of the peninsula. I was encouraged in this by the Italian Cultural Centre in Cairo, who suggested that I should produce material for an exhibition of photographs of the country and its people. Thus in the late 1980s I made regular visits to Sinai, generally going from Cairo to Sharm el-Sheikh by



bus, then branching off in different directions. Much of my travelling in the south was done by camel, often in the company of Sheikh Amer, well known for his unique knowledge of the area. As a foreign woman I had the advantage of being accepted by Sheikh Amer and the other men, and at the same time of being able to enter into the life of his and other families through the friendships I had made with many of the women.

My exhibition of the photographs of the Sinai Bedouin was first held at the Dutch Institute in Cairo and later at the Italian Cultural Centres in Cairo and Alexandria. It later transferred to the Sony Gallery at the American University in Cairo. The suggestion was then made to me by the former Italian Ambassador in Cairo, HE Patrizio Schmidlin, that I should publish a book of the photographs, and it was through his kind efforts that a sponsor was found for the project.

Special thanks are due to my sponsors, the company of Fincantieri of Trieste, who undertook work in the area. I would also like to express my thanks to Sheikh Ali and his family for their hospitality, and to Sheikh Amer and his family who accompanied me on my several journeys into

the hinterland from Dahab in South Sinai. In North Sinai I was indebted to the expert help afforded me by Kamal al-Helw and Said Mumtaz of the North Sinai Ethnographic Museum in el-Arish, and to that of Mohamed Koreim, the project manager for the German Development Agency in North Sinai. To Zohra Merabet of North-South Consultants I owe my initial introduction to the Dutch Institute in Cairo. The anthropologist Agnes Mejs Salman, of Dahab in South Sinai, generously shared with me her extensive knowledge of the area and its people. Ghisela Labib's enthusiasm for Sinai was a constant help. My thanks are also due to members of the Italian Cultural Centres in Cairo and Alexandria who assisted me in mounting my exhibitions. My appreciation goes to Piero Caputi whose studio in Rome did their usual brilliant best in printing my photographs. Also, in particular, my thanks to Denys Johnson-Davies for his general encouragement.

*Paola Crociani*  
1994



## INTRODUCTION

In this photographic essay Paola Crociani has preserved and presented the inner essence of Bedouin life today. She has chosen to portray the traditional life of the Bedouin of the Sinai. Her pictures are poised and balanced against a harsh and intermittently fantastic landscape. It is in the lines and crags of life-worn Bedouin faces and the strength of spirit expressed in the line of a shoulder or movement of an arm, together with the vulnerable grace of the young people, that the beauty of these images resides.

The modern world has not passed by the Bedouin of Sinai. They change and adapt to the evolution of the world about us. But they retain their links with the past, and with tradition, in a natural way that is less easy to achieve in the city. The women's dress, for example, bears from the past not merely the burden of tradition and an intricacy of meaning, but also literally incorporates history in the decorative objects handed from mother to daughter for generations, like the coins in a Bedouin woman's head-dress (p. 39). Meanwhile a man, who may well be discussing business deals of the most contemporary kind, wears traditional headgear, as did his grandfather,

and pours coffee from a copper pot which may also be a family heirloom (p. 77).

Bedouin dress is one of the marks which set the Bedouin apart from settled people and they retain it at least partly to distinguish themselves from the inhabitants of the town. Ibn Khaldoun, described as 'the greatest historical thinker of Islam', divided mankind, as seen from the Muslim world he knew, into two classes: the people of the desert and the people who lived in towns and cities. The characteristics of the nomad were the harsh simplicity of their life, their strict adherence to certain values and manners, and their loyalty to the family and tribe. History, he pointed out, was the story of how the people of the desert came into contact with those of the town, often through conquest, and settled down. Inevitably they were soon corrupted by power and luxurious living and were in turn swept away by other nomadic people. Ibn Khaldoun finds in the Bedouin a moral superiority, a superiority that has been tacitly acknowledged from the earliest times.

Bedouin men are proud of their herds of camels (p. 21) which not only provide milk, wool and meat, as do less aristocratic flocks of sheep and

goats, but also enable Bedouin to undertake long and difficult journeys across the desert. Today travel is more likely to involve a Peugeot estate car or a Toyota pickup truck, but the herds of camels are still there and continue to be marks of status for the men, as the gold and silver ornaments are for the women. Bedouin livelihoods themselves are distinctive, and what sets Bedouin apart is their independence.

A major change has been that many Bedouin men now work for wages, on the margin of settled communities. But just as Bedouin life in the past was one of autonomy and enterprise, a Bedouin looking for a contemporary livelihood will put a priority on being his own master. That may mean driving a taxi or truck, or it may be exploitation of Sinai's new natural resource, tourism (p. 93). Meanwhile, conventional Bedouin ways of adding cash to their subsistence economy continue, as women make decorative goods to sell through middlemen in the markets of Cairo (p. 85).

A feature of urban existence, in the Arab world as elsewhere, is that the roles of men and women have begun to overlap. Within the Bedouin world this is not the case. As these pictures show, there

is a women's world, and a separate world of men. Each sex has its own social sphere, and each occupies its distinct segment of economic life. Women cook (p. 69), and weave (p. 89) while men tend camels (p. 21) and travel about their affairs (p. 27). Men make major decisions about changes in a family's way of life, while women run the household. In the days of Bedouin tents, the tent contained separate areas for men and women, and visitors were received separately. Sedentarised Bedouin reproduce these patterns.

The Bedouin know that society is mutable, and that they must adapt to change. They have been offered incentives to settle down, which many have accepted. Bedouin tents, the sign of a fully nomadic life, are becoming rarer (p. 29). Many Bedouin in Sinai, as elsewhere in Egypt, have been given settled housing (p. 95). But even in their wooden shelters or little breeze-block houses, the Bedouin still belong to the desert, and after many thousands of years of nomadic life, the desert belongs to them. Camel nomadism, as a way of life, pre-dates not only Islam and Christianity, but also the civilisations of Rome and ancient Greece.

The Bedouin of Sinai today live in two main



regions, the north and south of the Peninsula. In the north they take advantage of the more moderate climate and the relatively lush vegetation of the strip of land that abuts the Mediterranean. Their social and commercial metropolis is the town of el-Arish. In the south they inhabit the coastal strip by the gulf of Aqaba and the foothills of the region surrounding the monastery of St Catherine. In this study, Paola Crociani has looked at the people of both areas. In the north, the dress and customs of the Bedouin link them to the Bedouin of the deserts of Palestine. The Bedouin of the south show similarities with those in Saudi Arabia.

Paola Crociani's Bedouin are dignified, self-absorbed and strong. Though isolated in a way of life which presents them with limited choices and narrow horizons, it is a way of life they understand and which for them has an intrinsic worth. As these photographs display, they are gallant and undaunted. The future of the Bedouin will depend on the extent to which they are able to adapt their ideals of economic and family independence to the spreading urbanisation and the modern world of work which is beginning to invade even Sinai.

Society may decide to preserve the Bedouin, but these indomitable people may themselves not wish to be artificially protected from their changing environment. The Bedouin have survived much change in the past, and there is no reason to suppose that they will not go on adapting into the future.

*by Dr John King*





B E D O U I N O F T H E S I N A I

## THE PLATES

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Fantastic landscapes meet the eye in Sinai.  
The desert is silent, yet the turbulence of the  
rocks matches that of the sky. This is the setting  
of Bedouin life.





B E D O U I N O F T H E S I N A I

*C*itadels of rock stand in the desert.





*A* Bedouin man threads his way purposefully  
through the wastes of stone.





*A*t its most remote, there is no sign of  
life in the sand and stones of the desert.





*A*lthough the landscape seems bare, fence-posts  
and oil drums show the debris of human activity  
and a Bedouin man takes a rest.





*A* man prays at dawn in south Sinai. Prayer  
five times a day is one of the pillars of Islam. In  
the background stand the rudimentary buildings  
of his settlement.





*M*en gather convivially to drink tea in the  
midst of the desert's forbidding topography.





These children at a Bedouin settlement in south Sinai are shy of a stranger, but happy to be photographed.



*A*n icon of tyres indicates to the passing driver that there is a garage nearby.





*A* man in north Sinai tends a herd of camels. Each camel is a valuable possession, and a source of wealth and pride.





Camels move east at dawn near Qantara, just to the east of the Suez Canal, through the scanty vegetation at the desert's margin. Camels can eat and digest even the toughest thorn bushes.



*C*amels at a watering hole near Qantara. A camel can survive long periods without water, but can drink copiously when water is available. They are the perfect partner for the Bedouin, who need sometimes to travel through the desert far from sources of food and water.





*A* traveller rests in south Sinai, looking out  
at the shore of Saudi Arabia, just twenty  
kilometres away across the Gulf of Aqaba.





*A* landscape and a scene of family life in south Sinai. The traditional Bedouin tent is less seen now than formerly. Its use implies these people retain the option to move, while those who now live in more permanent shelters remain at the site they have chosen.



*A* tea gathering. Networks of Bedouin  
criss-cross Sinai, so that men exchange news  
and gossip as they meet.





*A* woman with a flock of sheep in north Sinai. Here the comparatively plentiful vegetation makes it possible to keep sheep. Camels are the preoccupation of Bedouin men, while women and even children generally look after sheep, which do not have the same prestige.





Here at el-Arish, close to the waters of the  
Mediterranean, a girl tends sheep and goats, amid  
a palm grove.



*M*ost eloquent music' at a gathering of  
friends near Nuweiba, in south Sinai. One man  
plays a stringed instrument, a nebaba, while others  
clap the rhythm and sing.






*A* married woman from north Sinai,  
wearing her face veil, or 'burqa'. The  
conventional decoration of coins is a sign of  
wealth, and the beadwork and embroidery add  
to the decoration.





his elderly man from north Sinai wears a traditional head-dress but his cotton coat is of urban manufacture.



The woman has chosen to present her lined face to the camera unveiled, and exposes a dignity and beauty which speaks of a lifetime of endurance and experience.





*A* family group of women from north Sinai.  
The married women wear the 'burqa', while the  
unmarried girls veil themselves more simply with  
a fold of their shawls.





Two young girls, from north Sinai. The coins of their simple head-dresses are made from cheap metal, unlike the gold and silver of the 'burqa', and are a decoration. The older girl modestly veils her face with a corner of her shawl.



*A* woman dresses, fixing the veil to the head-dress. The jewellery is typical of north Sinai. The circular amulet with small pendants which hangs from the chain brings protection and good luck.





*H*er privacy protected by her veil,  
this woman rests for a moment while  
she is photographed.





Two older women from Sinai show their  
jewellery and embroidered clothes.



*A*n elaborately dressed old woman, allegedly  
in her 90s, veiled and jewelled, in north Sinai.





*A* married woman from north Sinai, near the town of el-Arish, displaying her 'burqa' and ornaments. Many of the coins with Arabic inscriptions bear the name 'Qustantiniyya' (Constantinople) and the Islamic date 1223 (1808). Other coins bear Latin inscriptions. The gold coins of her veil serve to show her wealth and social standing.






Two unmarried girls from Nuweiba in south Sinai wear a style of dress different to that of their sisters in the north. Their hair is carefully plaited and exposed, under a head covering embroidered at the edge, with a face veil separate from the cloak that covers their pretty dresses of material with flower patterns. Girls of this age often tend flocks of sheep.



*A* south Sinai girl in elaborate costume:  
she wears an intricate beadwork head-dress, with  
a pattern of plaited hair showing at the edge.  
Bedouin are traditionally less strict about women  
covering their faces and hair. The patterned  
material of her dress has been bought in the town.






wo women from south Sinai by the wooden building which forms part of their home. More Bedouins today are sedentarised, and stay in one place, rather than moving with their flocks and herds.





his girl, in the courtyard of her home,  
pours tea for women guests. Just as a man  
entertains passing male guests, the women provide  
hospitality for their kinswomen and friends.



*A* girl in a room of her breeze-block built  
house rolls out dough on a round wooden board.





*I*n this courtyard a woman bakes thin sheets of Bedouin bread on a metal sheet supported by stones over an open fire, watched by her son. Making bread in this way requires great skill, and girls begin early to learn the knack from their mothers.





*B*utter making in north Sinai. Yoghurt is put into the goatskin bag suspended from the tripod, and is shaken for two or three hours by swinging it backwards and forwards. For the women this becomes a social activity, and a pleasant time to spend together.



*A* traveller bakes his own bread outside a shelter. His two camels, one to ride and one to carry his packs, are tethered beyond the wooden rail. On a journey, a man must do what is normally women's work.





A man grinds coffee. Though domestic work is done by women, it is a man's privilege to give coffee to his visiting friends, and he will roast and grind the beans himself. The massive wooden pestle and mortar are heirlooms, passed down by families. This man is casually dressed, with no headbands round his keffiyeh, which is roughly tied as a turban.





*I*n formal clothes, with proper head-dress, the men drink coffee made in brass pots from delicate china cups. The host, at the right, has a small metal pestle and mortar.

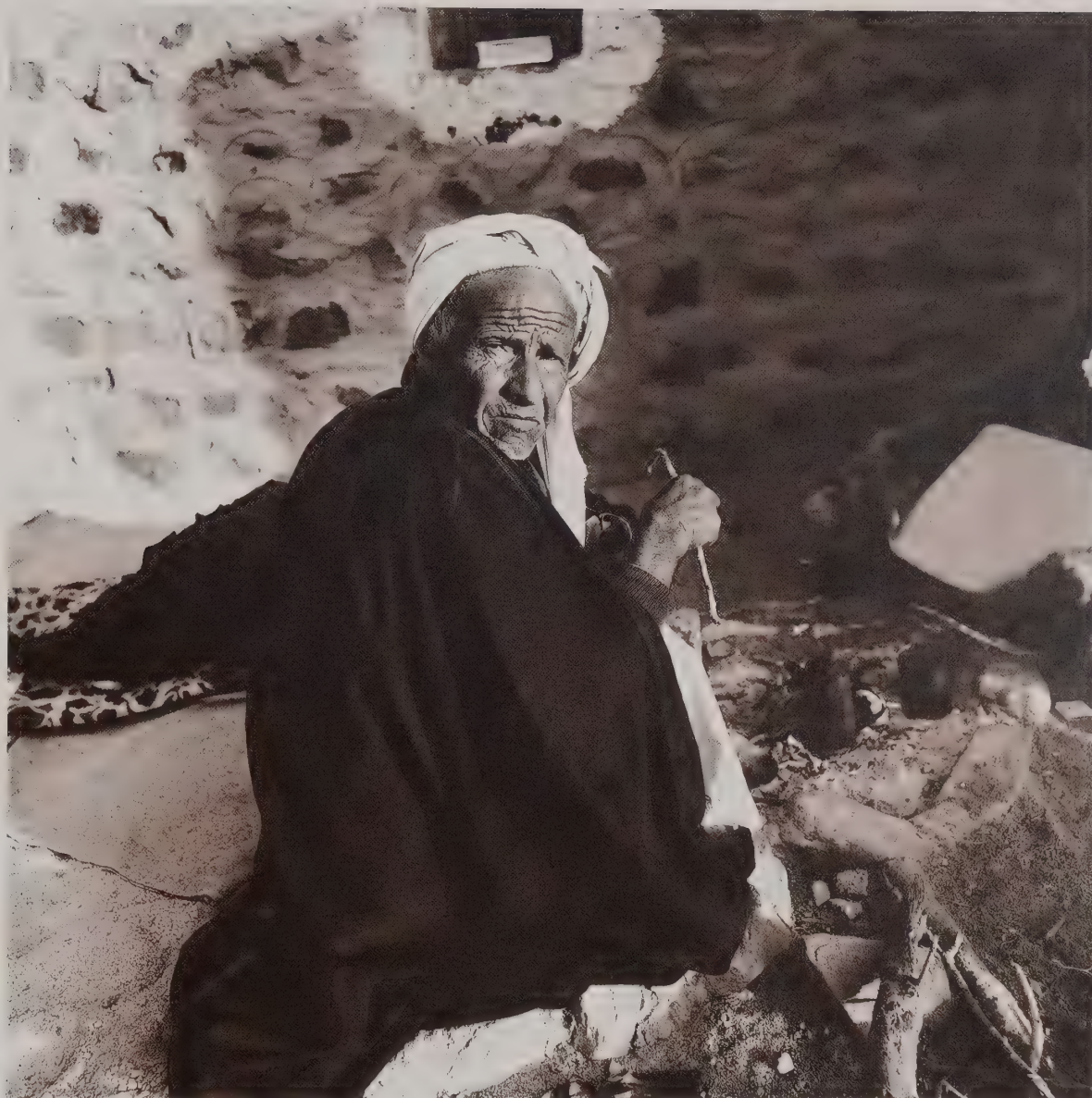


*S*heikh Ali, of Dahab, 80 kilometres south of Nuweiba on the Gulf of Aqaba. Dressed in a sumptuous brown wool robe, bought from the town where they are made for the Bedouin, he pours coffee for a guest.






*A* camel herdsman from south Sinai pours  
tea for a guest. A long lifetime of exposure to sun,  
wind and weather has left its mark on his face.





horn bushes provide the fire for each  
night's brewing of tea. Hangings decorate the walls  
of the wooden shelter.



A Bedouin woman, originally from Palestine, in north Sinai. The tattoos on her brow are now in general seen only on older people. She embroiders cloth with traditional designs, which will go for sale in the markets of Cairo. The large coin at the end of the ribbon which hangs from her head-dress bears an Austrian imperial eagle.






*A* woman in south Sinai works on her embroidery, watched by her children. Her head-dress is decorated with sea-shells and metal 'teardrops'. Behind her a wire fence and a brick building signal the encroachment of modernity.



*C*arpet weaving in north Sinai also produces merchandise which can be sold for cash in el-Arish or Cairo.






aking sheep to be watered in south Sinai.  
The water tank is a government installation.



A row of huts for rent to tourists, near the beach in south Sinai. Funded by government grants, enterprises like this give the Bedouin a new source of income.





his Nuweiba family have newly moved  
into settled housing.



These Bedouin have incorporated an outcrop of rock, moulded by centuries of erosion by the wind, into their new breeze-block courtyard.





*A* woman waters her goats. The word  
'Allah' is written on the wall next to the  
door behind her.



*A* woman at the weekly market in el-Arish  
bargains for trinkets and jewellery to add to the  
ornamentation of her clothes.





*A*nother new source of income: on the beach at Dahab, a boy waits to offer tourists rides on his family's camel.



The camel-boy at Dahab must wonder  
what other changes he will see in his lifetime.



















*P*aola Crociani was born in Siena and studied photography in Rome. In the late seventies she worked in Beirut as a freelancer for Associated Press, and in 1983 she became a staff photographer for AP, based in Cairo, covering major events in the Arab world and Africa. She has also travelled widely in the Indian sub-continent. She left AP to work on her own projects, including several in the Yemen and Hadramaut.

Dr John King is a journalist and broadcaster, and former head of the BBC Arabic Service bureau in Cairo.





*C*itadels of rock stand in the desert.

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